



## Developing a Leader

The following four stories are about my own development as a leader, which, as previously mentioned, was slow and difficult. I hope that readers of this book can avoid the difficulties I faced. My learning was disconnected, episodic, and often barely conscious. I learned by making mistakes, watching and talking to successful leaders, and reading about leadership theories that were never taught in graduate school. Many self-taught leaders develop in this way—piece by piece. Those who aspire to be leaders must put the disparate pieces together, which is no small task.

### Story One: How Not to Be a Leader

When I was appointed chair of a high school English department, I was energetic, enthusiastic, and went deep in coursework for a doctorate in English education. So, of course, I knew what was needed in my department. The teachers needed to learn all the new theories and teaching practices I was learning in graduate school, which would prepare them to teach the students to the best of their professional ability. While I continued the regular

monthly department meetings, I added a monthly professional discussion period in which a specific topic, journal article, or book chapter would be discussed. My plan was for each teacher to take a turn volunteering to lead the discussion at a meeting. However, after four months, I became the regular—and only—discussion leader for a dwindling group of teachers. By the end of the third quarter, I suspended the meetings “to give people time to deal with the pressure of the end of the school year.”

Internally, I felt resentful and hurt that these otherwise cordial and professional teachers did not grab this great opportunity to learn about the latest theories and pedagogies in teaching reading, writing, and literature. They didn’t seem to care, and I was confused—very confused—about why. It wasn’t until years later that I realized that these English teachers were teaching me a very important lesson about leading people—that people have to accept you as their leader—and here they had not. Unfortunately, at that point in my career, I was not open to learning this very central leadership principle.

### Story Two: A Leader at Work

Years later, I initiated a three-year project, collaborating on the redesign of a K–12 literacy curriculum in a local school district. At the conclusion of the project, the results were disappointing, except in one middle school. The principal of that school, I had heard, was a former reading supervisor who had learned the latest theories in leadership while in graduate school. He told me how he had spent an entire year convincing teachers in his school to accept and take ownership of the new curriculum. To accomplish this feat, he supported the reading, language arts, English, and content area faculty by attending their meetings; offered substitute teachers to cover classes so the teachers could have whole-day discussions; or sometimes provided just a can of soda for each meeting participant.

In the six other schools in the district, the effects of redesigning the curriculum were limited to the efforts of a few individual literacy teachers within their classrooms. But in that one middle school with the principal who had studied leadership, the effects spread outward to many classrooms, in both literacy and the content areas, and to the principal’s advisory council of teachers, administrators, and parents. This example made me realize that literacy professionals needed guidance in using these same leadership strategies, which would give their efforts in teaching and learning literacy a more panoramic impact. As I thought about my first leadership story, I

realized that my English department colleagues had tried to teach me the lesson that the middle school principal already knew—for the desired results to spread to faculty, staff, and community, leaders have to get teachers committed to the issues and policies as if they were their own.

### Story Three: What's in It for Me?

One evening during dinner with my brother, an executive in a nonprofit organization, I described a classroom and teacher I had visited that day. My description included the fact that the teacher called himself “the boss” and told me that he gave the “marching orders.” My brother shook his head and responded, “If you call yourself ‘the boss,’ you can only be a bad boss.” He went on to give me a minilecture about the newest studies on leaders in various organizations. As I listened, I thought about how teachers could learn from these leadership studies. He said, “Why don’t you read some of the stuff I’ve read? I’ll lend you a book or two.” My response was a chuckle and the question “What’s in it for me?”

To answer that question, my brother said that if teachers learned about leadership, they could learn to be leaders in a field to which they have devoted their work lives, namely, literacy. He argued that the values of literacy teachers (he called them “literacy leaders”) would begin to be seen as more important and worthwhile by students, parents, administrators, and the community—the stakeholders of literacy education.

Finally, with a wry smile, he pointed his finger at me and said, “And I’ll tell you what might be the most important answer to your ‘What’s in it for me?’” He said that we just might be able to create work lives that are more humane and more supportive of our professional and personal life goals. He went on to explain that maybe some of the mentalities that dominate many schools and colleges—such as punch in–punch out, close your door and do what you want, us against them—would change. In another words, good leadership skills could create more satisfying work lives in addition to increasing teachers’ effectiveness in school and community.

So I told my brother, “OK, let me borrow a couple of those books.”

### Story Four: Success Finally

Two years later, and now a faculty member in a university English department, I was elected to a four-year term as director of the department

doctoral program. Sixteen program faculty members were in the midst of “the troubles,” professional and personal disagreements that resulted in closed office doors, silence, separation, and anger. To this situation (and ultimately to this book), I brought the knowledge gained from two years reading the books my brother had loaned me. All the books pointed out importance of a concept known as *peoplework*, the constant effort to invite and value all stakeholders, which is the primary focus of successful leadership. Using *peoplework*, I focused on the faculty, administrators, and students who made up the doctoral program.

During my first year as director, I applied many *peoplework* strategies (see chapters 3–8). In the second year, while continuing to apply the strategies, I dropped those that seemed less effective and tried new ones, always keeping my focus on the people who made up the program.

Things began to change. Faculty members told me about improvements in their professional and personal lives. The doctoral students also sensed improvement, as did the department chair and the dean of the graduate school. Leadership studies supplied me with a boost of influence that benefited everyone—the program faculty, students, and administrators. I thanked my brother for the books that began my studies and decided to share the ideas in those books, which led to this book.

